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THE REAL JESUS

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There is a general recognition, on the part of those who study the gospels, and even on the part of many who read them superficially, that there is a considerable difference between the figure of Jesus that meets us in the Synoptists and that which stands on the pages of John's Gospel. These are the main elements of difference pointed out: First, a self-assertiveness in the Jesus of John, an extraordinary use of the first personal pronoun. Second, a style quite different from that of the synoptic Jesus. The Jesus of the first three gospels speaks in parable and proverb, in a simple style to be readily appreciated by common people; the Jesus of John talks like a classroom teacher rather than an open-air preacher. The difference appears readily if we contrast the parable of the Lost Sheep with the allegory of the Good Shepherd. Third, in John the figure of Jesus is more portentous, less simple. It is much easier to imagine John's Christ wearing a halo as he moved among men than to imagine the Christ of the Synoptists so arrayed.

These may serve as illustrations of the differences found between the Jesus of the first three gospels and the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel. They raise a question not easy to answer, Which is, or what was, the real Jesus?

Now the answer almost invariably given is that the Synoptists come nearer to what Jesus really was; that the representation in John is idealized, worked over, mixed with subjective notions and theological ideas, till we find it impossible to detach the real Jesus from the author's thoughts. Strong reasons are given in support of this view. The Synoptic Gospels come from many sources, while John's is evidently the work of a single thinker. The Synoptic Gospels took shape before the Fourth Gospel, and therefore are more reliable. It is a healthy instinct with us to give preference to the more natural, the less marvelous, of two accounts; and therefore we

find more satisfaction in the synoptic story. Finally, the style of the Fourth Gospel is identical with that of the epistles of John and that style runs through the whole book; Jesus talks that way, and John the Baptist, and everybody else. It is like one of Browning's dramas, in which every character, whatever sentiments he may voice, talks in the characteristic language and thought-modes of the poet. Here are indeed powerful arguments for the theory that John's Jesus is an idealized, made-over picture.

But there is something to be said for the other side, though it is not often said. Can we defend the proposition that John's representation of Jesus is at least as faithful as that in the first three narratives?

First of all, there is a growing appreciation of the eye-witness character of the Fourth Gospel. It is becoming harder all the time, I think, to defend the proposition that this gospel is simply the work of a pious imagination with a theological bias. The marks of a faithful witness are too many and too sure.

If we agree that this gospel comes in any large part from an eye-witness, the objection from its late date is greatly weakened, even if it does not altogether disappear. It is a minor matter whether personal recollections are written down early or late; it may affect coloring and style, as it undoubtedly has affected them here; but it will not seriously impair the faithfulness of the picture.

Again, even if we admit that the representation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is more portentous, less "natural," that conception of Jesus as unique certainly fits the impression which Jesus made on the men of his time who knew him best, and the impression he has made on the world since his time, especially on those who are personally attached to him. If Christian faith can be defended as worthy and practically valuable, then it is certainly significant that the conception of Jesus found in John's Gospel fits into the faith of the average Christian wonderfully well.

When we face the argument from style, we have to admit that the style of Jesus' own utterances has certainly been modified to conform to the peculiarities of the author of the Fourth Gospel. Yet a good case may be made out for the proposition that Jesus' own style was not so different from that of the Fourth Gospel as one might superficially think. It is easy to overlook many sayings of Jesus in the

synoptic accounts, which are similar to his sayings in the Fourth Gospel. There are bits of abstract and argumentative style, such as "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for all live unto him." There are arguments quite in the Johannine manner: "Who do men say that I am? Who say ye that I am?" "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have;" "Whosoever shall do the will of my Father in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister and mother;" "Ye are they that justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God." Almost any one of those sayings could be expanded into an argument such as we find in nearly every chapter in John. The last quoted has all the lack of shading, the severe black-and-white effect that is alleged to be a prominent characteristic of the Fourth Gospel.

There are mystic sayings in the Synoptists, quite like those in John. The promise, "If two of you shall agree as touching anything, it shall be done," is almost a literal parallel of the promise in the fifteenth chapter of John; while the word, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them," is strikingly like the promise in John 14:23. It is hard to point out any essential difference from the style of the Johannine Jesus in the saying, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and understanding and hast revealed them unto babes."

Nor is the allegory, as distinguished from the parable, so exclusively the vehicle used by the Jesus of John as some would have us think. What essential difference is there between "I am the vine, ye are the branches" and "Ye are the light of the world, the salt of the earth"? The saying in the Sermon on the Mount, "The light of the body is the eye," etc., is far more like one of John's allegories than it is like one of the synoptic parables. The significant utterance about the strait gate leading to life and the broad way leading to destruction is quite in the style of the Johannine Jesus.

But it is just in the place where critics tell us the greatest difference in style is found that we see most frequent instances of likeness—in the matter of Jesus' self-assertiveness. What is there in John more

lofty than the statement, "All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth; go ye therefore," or the word that follows, "Lo, I am with you alway even unto the end of the world"? Where is there more positive self-assertion than in such words as "In this place is one greater than the temple, greater than Jonah, greater than Solomon," or the statement, "Whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father"? One of the most stupendously self-assertive sayings of all is that word, "Come unto me all ye that labor, and I will give you rest." What self-assertiveness can be more marked than that which calmly makes the motive "for my sake" equal the motive "for righteousness' sake," as Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount? This self-assertiveness rises to a height and a style absolutely Johannine in the saying, "All things are delivered unto me of my Father; and no man knoweth the Son save the Father, neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him."

I venture to say that if these sayings of Jesus had been recently discovered as fragments, with no clue to their place, students would classify many of them with the Fourth Gospel rather than with the other three, and that at least two of them, those beginning, "Come unto me, all ye that labor," and "All things are delivered unto me of my Father," would be classed as Johannine in style almost or quite unanimously. In the face of so many examples of this style (and only a few have been given), we may well hesitate to admit the existence of a great gulf between the Teacher in John and the Teacher in the Synoptists.

There remains the argument that the sources for the narrative in the Synoptists are many, while the Fourth Gospel evidently comes from a single mind.

But this is precisely where the argument for the faithfulness of the Fourth Gospel gets its power. We find in the first three large sections literally the same, verbatim reports or nearly such. We find here, as is well-known and accepted, all the marks of a tradition, that passed from lip to ear, from one to another, through many minds. The first three gospels, in their present form, are the result of such a process of sifting, sorting, dropping some elements, retaining others, polishing, simplifying, abbreviating.

What is more likely than that as a result of such a smoothing process there should appear what we may well call a conventionalized Jesus? What elements would be most readily dropped as the tradition rolled on? Evidently abstract ideas, teachings in logical shape, theological conceptions, allegories, mystical assertions of the eternal significance of the person of Jesus. These would not readily pass from one mind to another. What would most surely be retained? Stories, simple acts, proverbial sayings. The very things that impressed the crowd when they were done or said would impress the crowd when they were related; and as the early preachers went everywhere telling the story of Jesus they would naturally dwell on the simple, straightforward elements in his words and deeds, till the more abstract part almost dropped out of sight.

It is easy to see the difference between the Sermon on the Mount and the fifteenth chapter of John. The Sermon has the sententious, limpid, proverbial form. But does that necessarily mean that it is nearer to the real style of Jesus' teaching? Is not the proverb almost always the result of passing from mind to mind, through a long process of handling and rubbing? The proverb is a rolling stone that gathers polish. These sayings in the great Sermon look like pebbles of thought, rolled over and over till they are smooth and round. When we grasp the significance of the process by which the Synoptic Gospels took shape, we wonder not that we do not find in them more sayings in the deeper and more abstruse style of John's Jesus; we wonder that any such sayings survived the process of conventionalization.

The prevalent view of the gospel story seems to be that at the source of Christian faith stands a wonderful man, living a beautiful life, speaking words of moral and religious truth exquisite for simplicity and clarity, dying a death that awes and inspires, and (perhaps) impressing on his friends the fact that after death he still lived. Time and thought took hold of that real man-figure, and added much of miracle of deed and miracle of dogma, till the Jesus of Galilee was transformed into the marvelous Christ of the creeds. In all the gospels we find traces of this glorification of Jesus, but most of all in the Fourth Gospel; and the synoptic account is very much nearer Jesus as he really was.

But that prevalent view fails to meet the real testimony of Christian

history and experience. It is the very elements which the critic says were added by pious imaginations that have won the faith of believers. With all deference to greater learning than my own, I am frank to say I believe Christ created the first Christians, not that the first Christians created Christ. Every time I try to catch the point of view of some critics--that the Christ of Christian faith is an apotheosis of a simple man of Galilee—I fall back on Matthew Arnold's dictum, "Jesus above the heads of his interpreters." To me what Christ has done in history is decisive as to his being creator, not product, of Christian faith.

This then is the hypothesis I would offer: Back of all these records stood the figure of Jesus, living his many-sided life. There were markedly two sides to that life, the simpler side of homely adaptation to daily life, and the more hidden, more complex, more unique side of lofty thought, of eternal vision, of God-communion, of grasp on the great truths that lie hidden in daily conduct as the steel frame is buried in the modern building. The crowd that watched and listened caught accurately the simpler side. Out of each discourse they grasped and treasured up but a few sentences; much of it left them confused, bewildered at the revelation of a mind far beyond their power of thought; but they carried away bits of wonderfully simple wisdom. And our three Synoptic Gospels, growing, as we know they did grow, by a process of working over the facts through the formation of popular traditions, preserve for us that popular impression which Jesus made.

But only a few could catch the inward truth of Jesus' life. It was the hidden face of the moon, that never shows itself to the ordinary gaze. His loftier sayings were arrows shot into the air. Only in the heart of a friend could they find lodgment, as the arrow in the unknown oak. And, lodging there, in the heart of a friend, these impressions of the inner life of Jesus grew and deepened, till they took shape in this last of the gospel stories. John's account is subjective, of course, colored with the personal feeling of the writer; that was inevitable in a biography built on personal impressions by a man of imagination powerful and sensitive enough to see what Jesus really was at heart. But, for all its subjectivity and technical inaccuracies, a biography written by a personal friend out of his personal impres-

sions and recollections may reveal the real man better than a literally exact story, just as a painting may give a better idea of a landscape than the most accurate photograph could give.

But I hold that the picture of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels is not a simple photograph. It is a conventionalized picture, a composite of many views, the result of a process of sifting and smoothing that has made the figure of the Son of God as nearly commonplace as it was possible for it to be made. I have in my home a composite photograph of the Madonna, made from over a hundred celebrated pictures of the mother of the Savior. There is a wonderful simplicity, sweetness, and softness, caught from the blending of the differing views here gathered into one face. Yet I would far rather look at the Sistine Madonna. I think I get nearer the real woman there.

Neither the composite, that has gathered into itself the impressions made on the many, nor the portrait that reflects the individual view of the artist, is complete. Each helps the other. Perhaps the world at large gets the best possible idea of our Friend from the composite photograph. But for those who love him and are honored with his personal friendship, there is a peculiar charm in the color and warmth of the portrait, that makes them say, Here best of all I meet the real Friend whom my heart loves.